Yixin Zhang

Wray

A2 Sophomore H. English

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Tannenbaum

*Western Front, Northern France: December 24, 1914*

A sliver of sky is blue.

Not a warm-summer-ice-cream-and-lemonade blue. Not a rushing-salty-exploding ocean blue.

Just… blue.

Icy blue. Pale, thin, barely-there blue. Emotionless blue.

I lean my head back against the frozen mud and shiver, but this is the warmest position I can find. The soil walls loom several feet above my head and continue to my left and right, compressing towards each other in the distance, until the thin slice of sky that I can see all but vanishes. It is like living at the bottom of a dirt well that twists and carves its way through the plains.

A large rock is embedded in the earth on my left, too large for the diggers to have torn out when the trench was carved from the ground. I touch the deep tallies I had engraved into the earth there – twelve of them. An even dozen.

A line for each day.

For a moment, I feel empty. What I wouldn’t give to be home again, eating sweet apple pie and smooth hot chocolate with Henry at the little plain wood kitchen table, laughing together and warm and carefree –

And I open my eyes and I am still alone in the water-soaked trench in the middle of Northern France, and Henry is gone, gone, gone forever.

I will not cry. Heavy artillery fire means little fresh food and water from the support trenches, and tears waste salt. I will not cry.

I do not hear the footsteps until a gray-blue shadow falls over me. I look up, dazed.

“Hey, Beckett.” The thin man’s voice seems travel through water before it reaches me.

“Jelly,” I reply after a slightly awkward pause.

“Yeah, glad you returned to Earth, dreamer.” He grins teasingly. “Captain was handing these out, but you weren’t there, so I told him I’d deliver it to you. Merry Christmas.”

I take the small rectangular brass box he offers. On its elaborately decorated metal lid is engraved the profile of a young woman. “What is it?”

“Captain called it a Princess Mary box, or something of the like. Said they were from the king,” Jelly says absentmindedly. He is already busy prying the lid open. “Ah,” he sighs in satisfaction when the contents are revealed.

“’S in it?” I ask distractedly, without any real curiosity.

“Cigarettes.” He shows me, and even I have to smile at the look of satisfaction on his face. My box exposes similar items when opened. I pull out an enclosed card etched with elaborate, curling letters.

*May God protect you and bring you safe home. HRH King George V*

What does it mean – bringussafehome? What does it mean to the thousands that already can never return alive?

My light mood suddenly seeming to fade away, I tuck the card back into the tin box and place it aside.

“You don’t want yours?” Jelly says around the lit cigarette between his teeth, wearing an expression in a mixture of comedic shock and indignation.

“You can have them, if you want.”

“Nah, you’ll be wanting them later.” He takes a long whiff of the tobacco, and the tip of the cigarette glows cherry red for a moment, then turns a charred black once more. I eye his fingers on the long cylinder – they are sickly pale and almost skeletal.

“Yeah, lost another few pounds this week,” Jelly says quietly, noting my gaze. I glance away guiltily, but he simply flutters the offending digits. “Think I’m skinnier today than I ever was in my life.” He shrugs. “Ah well. Grandpop always told me I was too chubby.”

The unspoken words hang heavily in the air – we both know that Jelly will die soon.

Wastage, we call it – not dying with the fight in the field, but one by one of disease and hunger. It seemed so gruesome at first – but now every one of their deaths means the greater chance that I will die out there, when we finally hear the trumpet’s lonely cry and leap over the side of the trench to meet our grim fates. Wastage, because their deaths mean mine.

“Oy, Beckett!”

I blink away the reverie, and Jelly and I shift to see the pale soldier make his way towards us.

“Maddern,” I greet him, attempting a smile that probably looks more like a spasm.

Maddern grins back easily. “You two gentlemen chatting again? I don’t know how you manage to find this free time. I’ve been breaking my back cleaning the latrines all morning.”

“Ay,” Jelly slaps him on the back. “But we all know that ol’ captain loves to saddle you with chores.”

“Ever since you hid that toad in his helmet,” I remember, finally cracking a smile.

“Ha,” Maddern says good-naturedly. “Deserved it, that cow. Told me a chicken could repair barbed wire better than I could.”

“It’s true.”

Maddern chuckles. “Moot point. I actually came over to tell you that the captain organized a truce with the Fritz.”

“He contacted the Germans?” The cigarette almost slips out of Jelly’s fingers in his surprise. “What for?”

“Burial truce. Even the Germans thought that, in the spirit of the holidays, it’s about time to give proper last rights to those fellows out there.” Maddern gestures towards No Man’s Land with a careless wave of his hand, but he watches my face carefully as these last words leave his mouth.

I can hear Jelly loudly replying, but I do not respond.

How many bodies lie rotting on the fields? Unattended to, uncared for, almost like they don’t matter. Like they are just numbers – now 1,000 dead, now 5,000 casualties, 10,000, more – numbers that just keep climbing, but just numbers, just nothing.

My brother lies out there.

Somewhere past the trench wall, among all the tangled barbed wire, all the pits glazed in shredded metal, all the shattered bodies strewn carelessly among the killing fields, a thin young man with a sure, easy smile and ambitions to rival the stars lies lifeless, his outstretched wings never able to take for the sky.

I would like to believe that Henry Beckett is still alive, wandering the English supporting trenches several miles behind us or delayed by a wound on the field – but the chances of that are so slim they are barely worth considering. A man sent over the top is better off finalizing his will and addressing last letters to his children than wasting his time with hopes of survival.

Almost two weeks now. And each passing moment means the shrinking of the chance that Henry will come crawling back into the British trenches, gravely wounded and covered in blood and grime, but alive.

Alive.

Maddern puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

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There are so many bodies, so many lying broken and so still on the frozen earth, their eyes blank and staring, and so many more who have no faces and no eyes, all wrecked and fallen by broken metal.

A boy who could not be much older than eighteen, who had no doubt enlisted as soon as his birthday passed, who was so eager to serve his country that he could not have possibly seen himself now, half of his torso torn away by flying shrapnel…

…the frozen remains of desperate young man lying upon the shredded body of his brother, their faces contorted in identical grimaces of confusion…

…the proud, blank face of a thin young man, his cut and tattered hands frozen around the barrel of his rifle, as if it is trophy of his valiance…

…an old soldier crumpled in a hole dug by landing artillery, his face almost peaceful if not for the dried and cracked blood painting his face and shoulders. I wonder who had stopped to close the old man’s eyes, and if he had paid for giving these last rights with his life.

“Over here,” Maddern calls quietly, and I wrench my eyes away from the devastation. His figure is crouched nearby over the fallen form of another soldier, one with stubbornly curly brown hair and forest eyes crisscrossed with white webs like cracked glass and a thin scar running from the corner of his mouth to his chin –

I think that I stopped breathing. I think that a sudden burst of rifle fire tore through my lungs and throat and left nothing but a gaping hole that could only leak away my life force. I think that all motion ceased to exist even though the world had begun spinning and the sky and earth had reversed themselves.

No. *No.*

I collapse onto my knees and grab the fallen man’s hand; but his hand in mine does not feel like comfort, like reassurance when I was seven and accidentally left the milk to curdle and our father had gone puce with rage. His hand is… cold; like a block from the frozen creek on the farm when the winter temperatures fall.

*NO.*

I clutch the ice sculpture like it was my lifeline. For the first time since arriving at the trenches, I feel utterly alone, on my own in the suffocating fear and desolation.

“Beckett.”

I register the voice like I subconsciously recognize the frozen earth under my knees and the crippling wind chilling my hands and face.

“Beckett.” This time the voice is accompanied by a pressure on my shoulder. I look up, dazed. Who is this gaunt man staring at me with his hand on my shoulder? What are we doing here?

“Come on, man, stand up,” the pale man coaxes. “Beckett, let’s go. Come on.”

“Henry.” It does not occur to me that the choked, coarse voice is my own until I taste blood from my dried lips cracking in the motion. “Maddern, it’s Henry.”

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*The apple trees hung heavy with brilliant red fruit, the warm summer air filled with the crisp sweet tang. A bright orange painted the darkening sky, splashing wispy clouds with color.*

*“Henry!” I shouted, bursting into the farmhouse’s little kitchen. The brown-haired boy at the wooden table looked up from his book, and his green eyes widened at the tears cascading down my face.*

*“Christopher? What is it?”*

*“The – the flowers!” I cried. “They’re* gone*!”*

*Henry sighed, of relief and frustration. “Yes, Christopher. The apple blossoms have grown into apples.” But my crying did not cease. “Now we have yummy fruit for jam and pies and –”*

*“But – but the flowers were so* pretty *–”*

*My brother raised his eyebrows and wordlessly put his book down. Grabbing a knife from the table, he caught my arm with the other hand and dragged me out into the orchard.*

*“H–Henry?”*

*He plucked a ripe crimson fruit from the lower branches and sliced it in half.*

*“See?” he said, placing a piece in my hands. The seeds formed a perfect five-petalled orchid in the center of the crisp fruit.*

*Henry smiled.*

*“I found your flower.”*

*---*

*The leaves were beginning to grow anew after a hard winter and the air held the cool scent of dirt and pine. I stood barefoot on the slippery rocks beside the fast creek while a twelve-year-old Henry knelt by the water, peering into the clear depths.*

*“Henry, I don’t think this was a good idea.”*

*“Don’t be ridiculous, Christopher.”*

*“What if you fall in?”*

*“The creek’s not even that deep – only comes up to my waist. Besides, Mom’ll be so happy when we catch a fish for her birthday pres – oh!”*

*Henry lunged forward as a glimmer of silver scales caught the sunlight, but lost his balance on the wet rocks.*

*“Henry!” I shouted, terrified as my brother plunged headfirst into the water. I scrambled closer to the water’s edge. What if he drowned? Or hit his head too hard on the bottom? Or –*

*A hand sprang out of the water and caught my wrist, pulling me into the creek with a graceless splash.*

*“Aaaargh!”*

*Henry’s laughins face emerged from the water. “Gotcha,” he grinned, splashing water into my face.*

*And, probably scaring away all the fish within five miles, a loud water battle commenced.*

*---*

*The leaves were still dressed in their full green plumage, and the air held a thick and heavy heat. My brother was 22, I 19.*

*“Don’t forget to write,” my mother choked, holding onto the two of us for a final time. Her warm cinnamon-apple-bread scent lingered in the air even as I pulled away.*

*“No problem, Mama,” I reassured her with a salute. “We’ll have those Germans beat by Thanksgiving!”*

*“You boys take care.” My father put a hand on my shoulder and stared past me at my brother. “Henry, you keep your brother safe.”*

*“Yes, sir,” said Henry seriously, though the effect was ruined somewhat by the excited smile on his lips.*

*We exchanged one last embrace with our mother before marching off down the road, already pretending we were shooting down the German defenses.*

*---*

*Thanksgiving was past and gone, and December had arrived, the end of the war nowhere in sight. Dusk had fallen in the trenches, and with it, the temperature. I shivered and pulled my jacket closer around me, but to no avail – the cold cut to my bones.*

*Henry stood silently beside me, gazing up into the dark sky.*

*“I’ll be back,” he said after a while. “You’ll see. When the attack is over, I’ll be on e of the first back into the trenches.”*

*He turned to give me a tight smile, but the fading light casted shadows onto his face – for a second I saw a skull grinning back at me.*

*“Stay out of my food supplies while I’m gone,” he said and clapped a hand on my shoulder. But even I could hear the strain in his voice, see the trembling in his hands as he vanished into the darkness.*

*---*

*Dawn had broken by the time the shots from the German lines had finally slowed. The first rays of weak winter light barely revealed the few of my comrades crawling back into the trenches; the attack had failed.*

*I pushed my way through the waiting troops and medics, scanning the bandaged and bloodied faces for my brother.*

*“Henry!” I called. “Henry!”*

*Was that him, the man over there with the bandage on his forehead? – no, that man had black hair – him, with the wrapped-up arm? – no, too short – the man lying with a bandage over his chest? – no –*

*No, no, no.*

*“Henry!* Henry*!”*

*But someplace in the back of my panicked mind, I knew that Henry Becket was not going to return.*

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I sit on the cold dirt earth with Maddern’s frayed blanket over my shoulders where Henry’s body had laid, staring dully at the stain of red that is all that I had left of my brother. His body had frozen stiff, but still Jelly and Maddern had managed to lay him to rest in the freshly dug graves with his fallen comrades. The others had given up digging into the frozen ground; each pit held several bodies of the fallen. I try to forget the horrid cracking sound that had resounded through the solemn air as Henry’s body was thrown on top of the others, their solid ice corpses colliding with each other like metal on metal.

I hug my knees to my chest.

Henry should not have died. He should have returned safely and gone home unharmed to the little farm in England. He should have lived to ripe old age with a laughing little grandson on his knew, then buried peacefully under the swaying apple trees. He should have come back.

Dammit, he should have stayed with me.

Something warm and wet falls down my cheek, and I scrub it away angrily.

“Hello, English soldier.”

I jump at the unexpected accented voice, my hand instinctively reaching for the knife hidden under my jacket, forgetting in that instant that there is a truce, and that I am not about to find a dagger between my ribs.

“Hello,” I respond stiffly, turning to meet my surprise companion.

He is a German man, in his forties at least, with a stocky build and slumping shoulders. Like the rest of us, his head is shaved as close as possible to the scalp to avoid lice, but he claims a fantastic mustache – though it is speckled gray.

*Stupid German*, I think. *Interrupting me, can’t he see that I’m mourning?*

But the German just smiles benevolently, his wrinkled pale face crinkling like folds of cotton cloth. I don’t even bother trying to return the gesture.

“I believe you are enjoying the sunlight?” His words are carefully crisp and clear, but his deep voice bends the English words into an exotic tongue.

“I am,” I reply in a clipped voice. *Will he get a clue and just leave?*

“That is good.” His grin widens. “There is rarely sunlight during the snow season at home.”

*He is either incredibly stupid or incredibly insensitive.*

I nod, hoping to let the conversation lapse into silence, but the persistent German inquires, “Might I sit beside you?”

I stiffen uncomfortably. “I suppose you might.” *No, you may not*, I add in my head. Can’t he see that I want to be alone, want to mourn my brother in silence?

Ignoring my obvious uneasiness, he settles comfortably onto the soil beside me and pulls out a cigar from the generous folds of his thick jacket. “Would you like one?” he offers.

I shake my head. He shrugs and lights his own cigar, taking a deep whiff of the tobacco before exhaling a plume of gray smoke.

“That was your *bruder* back there,” he says after a pause. “Your brother.” It is not a question.

I freeze.

“I had a brother once too,” he continues quietly. “He was so tall and strong, but gentle and kind. The best brother any man could have.” He chuckles. “He once gave me the only food he had for three days, an apple, to keep me from being hungry.” But the German falls silent here, and I struggle for air as my own memories threaten to surface.

“What happened to him?” I ask – anything to keep me from remembering, thinking of apples, blossoms, of Henry –

“He is dead.” The German’s voice is abruptly blunt and detached. “A bullet to his neck. He did not even have time to cry out.” He inhales deeply from the cigar again, closing his eyes as if to keep himself from seeing the moment once more. “So many things,” he murmurs so softly that I am not sure if the words are even meant to reach my ears. “So many things we see in war.”

Not knowing how to reply, I nod silently.

A tense silence expands in the air.

“Er, your English is… very good,” I say when I can no longer bear the quiet.

His deep-set blue eyes open once more, and they are amused.

“My father taught me when I was a child. He told me that it would be useful one day.” He smiles. “He was always correct, of course. A great man, my father. I try to follow his steps, but I do not know if I always succeed.” At this, he begins rummaging through his pockets.

“This is my son,” he says in his thick, heavy accent. His hand trembles as he pulls the little square paper, yellow and speckled with dirt, from the pocket of his voluminous worn jacket. I lean closer to see the pale faded black ink etched on the paper’s surface.

He is a thin boy, his skin a pasty pale under the curled dark hair framing his narrow face. He stands in rough, thin cotton clothes atop a fallen log, and the cloth hangs like oversized drapes on his thin limbs – yet his gaunt face beams as he holds the shined rifle on his bony shoulder, a smile reaching from ear to ear. He could not be more than seventeen.

“Wilhem,” the old German says softly. “*Mein sohn*.”

He brings a finger to the boy’s face, as if imagining the soft warmth of a child’s cheek in the worn paper.

“He is a brave boy, my Wilhem,” the German says proudly. “When he joins the army he will do his country good.”

But I watch his lonely eyes staring at the young boy holding the hunting prize so proudly, and his callused knuckles whiten. A glistening trail, throwing quiet diamonds in the rare clear sunlight, curls down his cheek, thick and soft, carving a valley of shadows on his gaunt face.

“Yeah,” I say quietly, “I know.”

I turn my head away to let him rub his hand across his eyes.

“Right now – right now I am remembering that I did not say goodbye,” he chokes. “I thought I would be back by Oktoberfest. Now what I would not give to be able to tell him *abschied*, tell him *ich liebe dich*.”

Hesitantly, I place a hand on his shoulder; he does not brush it off.

“I think we all feel the same way.”

We sit there on the frozen ground that evening, German beside English, Fritz beside Tommy, wearied soldier beside wearied soldier, exchanging words of our pasts, our families. The captain would call it fraternizing with the enemy – but the sheer comfort of the companionship, the exchange of our pasts, consoles me more than anything could have.

When the skies darken and we stand up to part, he pulls out a handful of hard candy from his pocket and presses them into my hand, along with the cigar that I had refused earlier.

“I hope that when this war is over, you will be able to safely return to your homeland Britain,” he says with a faint smile. “I hope that you will once again see your apple trees and your *familie*.”

“Ay,” I return. “And you.”

It is only after we have walked our separate paths to the opposite ends of the fields that I realize that I never asked for his name.

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“What are they doing?”

Maddern stands on the tips of his toes to look over the trench sides at the German lines. I yank him back down.

“What are *you* doing?” I hiss. “Is your head full of holes? If you do that some sniper is gonna put one through yours!”

He impatiently shakes off my hand.

“No, look, Beckett, just look!” He resumes his post on the muddy wall. Sighing, I comply.

The German front lines glow with lights, glowing flickers illuminating sections of the trenches with a warm yellow radiance. At first, the lights are lonely marks in the velvet darkness, but as we watch, new lights spring up along the trench, until the entire German front line glows with the warm sparks. But they are not lanterns to enlighten the fields for an over-the-top mission – nor do they look like evening prayer candles for some overly pious soldier; no, they almost look like –

“English soldiers, English soldiers!” an accented voice calls to us from across the field. “Happy Christmas! Where are your Christmas trees?”

And a single voice begins to sing, weaving a familiar melody in a strange tongue, and one by one, others join the lonely song until the field rings with the harmony of the carol. Maddern and I look to each other in surprise.

“Sing with us, English soldiers!” a voice calls across the field after a while, and the song shifts into a familiar tune, a tune of home, a tune I know –

*“O come all ye faithful!” Henry belted out at the top of his lungs.*

*He stood on a ladder so his ten-year-old arms could place the star atop the Christmas tree. “Joyful and triumphant!”*

*His voice cracked when he hit a high note. I giggled, and Henry grinned at me.*

*“Sing with me, Christopher!” he said, laughing. “Sing –!”*

“O come ye, o come ye, to Bethlehem.”

Beside me, Maddern looks at me in shock for a moment, but he joins in, and one by one the rest, until the English lines ring with song.

What does it matter if what the Germans sing is the Latin version of the song? Or that our voices never quiet hit the correct pitches? For the first time, German and English sing together, our voices standing strong in the stifling black night, calling together voices of young and old, doctors and farmers, worker and entrepreneur, brothers and fathers…together in harmony.

We are a single voice that rings across the empty blood-soaked soil and carries farther, resonating far into the starry expanse above.

Tomorrow, we will be at war once again - British pitted against German, army lines disciplined to kill and advance, ragged metal against torn bone and flesh.

But today, we are brothers.

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Attribution of Research

1. Duffy, Michael. "The Christmas Truce." First World War.com - A Multimedia History of World War One. 22 Aug. 2209. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

* “Fritz” was a nickname for German soldiers
* A “Tommy” was a British soldier
* Some truces were initiated by the need to bury troops’ bodies in No Man’s Land
* “Princess Mary boxes” were metal cases given out by George V
* Princess Mary boxes contained tobacco and a card saying, “May God protect you and bring you safe home.”
* In the evening, Germans began to sing carols
* The day of the truce saw rare clear skies and sun

2. Duffy, Michael. "Life in the Trenches." First World War.com - A Multimedia History of World War One. 22 Aug. 2009. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

* Daily chores were assigned by captains
* Between chores, soldiers had free time for activities such as reading and writing home
* One chore was to clean the latrines
* Soldiers had to repair barbed wire in No Man’s Land
* The frozen ground was hard to dig into
* Graves were extremely shallow
* Curious soldiers peering over parapets were often shot down by snipers
* Soldiers shaved their heads to avoid lice
* Most military movement was restricted to nighttime

3. Hodges, Paul D."Christmas Truce." World Book Advanced. World Book, 2011. Web. 12 Feb. 2011.

* The truces began December 24, 1914
* The truces were cease-fires between British and German soldiers
* British and German soldiers exchanged gifts

4. Hodges, Paul D. "Trench warfare." World Book Advanced. World Book, 2011. Web. 16 Feb. 2011.

* The trench walls were 6-8 ft tall
* Support trenches ran behind the front lines and provided fresh food and water
* Enemy gunfire sometimes prevented the front-line from receiving supplies
* Soldiers who died of disease and cold (no in No Man’s Land) were called wastage
* “Over the top” meant being sent over trenches and across No Man’s Land
* There were millions of casualties from over the top campaigns
* No Man’s Land was filled with barbed wire
* No Man’s Land was riddled with holes from artillery fire
* Rapid-fire artillery could quickly shoot down attackers

5. Larson, Eugene. Rev. of Silent Night, by Stanley Weintraub. Magill’s Book Reviews (2001): 1. MagillOnLiterature Plus. Web. 16 Feb. 2011.

* The war began in August
* Most people assumed that the war would be over by Christmas
* German troops placed Christmas trees with candles on the parapets

6. "Settling In: The First Years on the Western Front." World War I Reference Library. Ed. Sara Pendergast, Christine Slovey, & Tom Pendergast. Vol I: Almanac. Detroit: UXL, 2002. 31-56. Gale Virtual Reference Library/. Web. 14 Feb. 2011.

* The truce was preceded by freezing temperatures
* The evening of the truce, lights appeared on German lines
* Some British soldiers thought that the lights were the Germans preparing to attack
* One German soldier called out, “English soldiers, English soldiers, happy Christmas! Where are your Christmas trees?”
* When the British began to sing *O Come All Ye Faithful*, the Germans joined in with the Latin *Adeste Fidéles*
* The truces took place on the Western Front in Northern France